AN INTRODUCTION

SDS

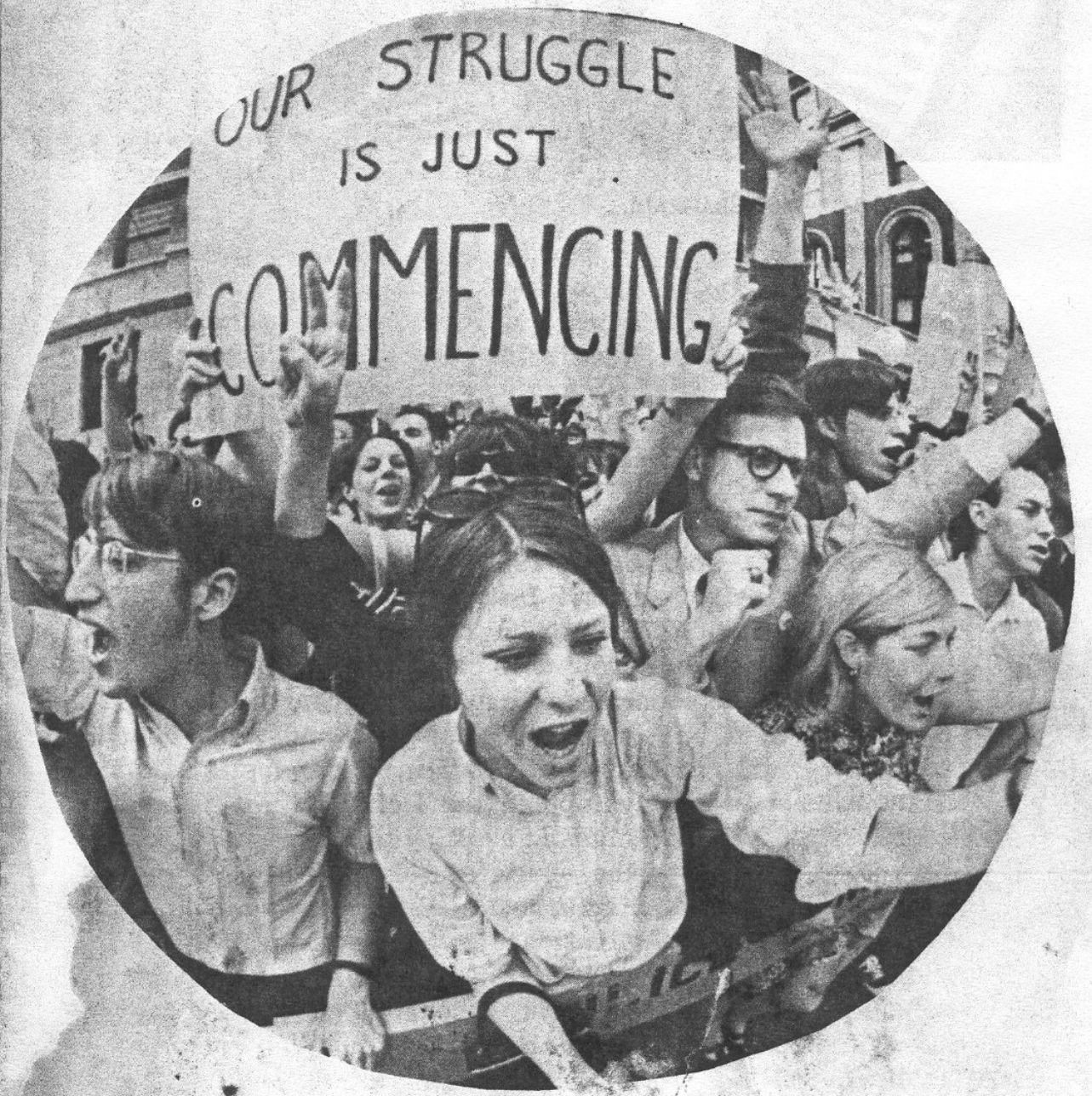

PHOTO BY GREG BRAMHALL

the emergence of the new left

In the spring of 1968, thousands of students in New York's Columbia University erected barricades and battled police following a successful four-week strike against University complicity in the Vietnam War and racist expansion programs in nearby Harlem. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of French workers and students—after seizing factories, schools, and streets—nearly toppled the DeGaulle government. Significantly, the mass revolt grew out of student protests against the policies of the first French "multiversity" at Nanterre. In West Germany student strikes and demonstrations involving thousands were directed against the Government's passage of "emergency laws" giving near-dictatorial powers to itself. In Japan, Italy, and the Scandinavian countries, similar actions have been occurring as well.

The identifiable thread running through these internationally dramatic events is an assortment of radical student organizations. These groups make up the core of what has come to be known as the New Left. Although they have only been visible to the general public for the past two or three years, most of these organizations first formed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Generally, they are made up of students and unaffiliated young people within those advanced capitalist countries with highly developed technological societies.

The post-World War II rapid transformation of these economies had a similar effect on their systems of higher education—the growth of the "knowledge factories" or multiversities. With the dominant social themes of this period being affluence, consumption, and adjustment, the young men and women were expressing their cultural oppression and personal alienation with growing intensity. Out of apathy and the gray flannel suit emerged James Dean, Marlon Brando, and the Angry Young Man—the Beat Generation. Also, following the Hungarian Revolt crushed by the Soviets in 1956, hundreds of young intellectuals left the European and US Communist Parties in disgust over the crimes of Stalin.

All this, to be sure, was only an undercurrent, a minor key. In the mainstream was the Cold War, Joe McCarthy, the silent generation filing into heavily-mortgaged Ozzie and Harriet suburbia, the prototypes of Carl Oglesby's man of those times—slim-waisted, swivel-hipped, bullet-headed make-out artists. While many young activists of today may find these images rather alien, this is where the history of the New Left begins. These were the conditions giving birth to our present movement.

the growth of sds

The central force of the New Left in the United States has been Students for a Democratic Society or SDS. We are a young, rapidly growing movement; only sixty-odd people attended our founding convention at Port Huron, Michigan in 1961. Even by early 1965, SDS had fewer than twenty-five hundred members with chapters on less than forty campuses. However, with its April 17th, 1965 March on Washington to End the War in Vietnam, SDS grew in national prominence. Presently, there are over forty thousand national and local SDS activists in more than three hundred chapters in universities across the country.

In the early years, SDS was a coalition of liberals and radicals, working from a multi-issue perspective on the questions of peace and disarmament, civil rights, poverty, and university reform. We supported reform Democratic electoral campaigns, and in 1964 even put out a button

saying "Part of the Way with LBJ".

Our bitter yet powerful experience with American politics in the 1960s has moved us considerably away from our original Left-liberal stance. Today SDS is a mass radical and anti-imperialist student movement. The critique we are developing of American corporate capitalism has brought us to advocate the necessity of an activist and revolutionary politics for the New Left.

where do we stand?

ON VIETNAM AND US FOREIGN POLICY

SDS completely opposes the US Government's immoral, illegal, and genocidal war against the people of Vietnam. We insist on the immediate withdrawal of all US personnel from that country. Moreover, we see the US policy in Vietnam as part of a global strategy for containing revolutionary change in the "Third World" nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Rather than the result of an essentially good government's mistaken decisions, we see the world-wide exploitation and oppression of those insurgent peoples as the logical conclusion of the giant US corporations' expanding and necessary search for higher profits and strategic resources. That system is most properly named imperialism, and we stand by and support all those who struggle against its onslaught. They are our brothers and sisters, not our enemies.

ON THE DRAFT AND THE MILITARY

SDS demands the abolition of the Selective Service System. We see the Draft as racist and anti-democratic, procuring manpower for aggressive wars abroad. Moreover, through the "deferment" system, the primary coercive function of the Draft is "channeling" the lives of millions of young people outside the Military into lifelong vocations deemed "essential" by corporate military elites rather than freely chosen by themselves. We urge and will organize all young men to wage a collective struggle in resistance to the Draft by refusing to serve in the Military. We also seek to break the barriers placed between us and our brothers in uniform. When forced by threat of imprisonment or exile, some of us will organize within the Armed Forces, advocating desertion and other forms of resistance to US foreign policy.

ON THE BLACK LIBERATION MOVEMENT

SDS has long and actively supported the struggle of black Americans for freedom and self-determination. Racism and exploitation confront black people as a group, together as a people. From this given condition of their daily lives, black people must act as a group in establishing their common identity, and in planning

a strategy to challenge their oppression. We do not simply "tolerate" the growth of black consciousness, we encourage it. Criticizing "black power" as "racism in reverse" is as mistaken as denouncing the American Revolution of 1776 as "colonialism in reverse". In addition to confronting all aspects of institutionalized racism in American life, we strongly believe that the strongest support we can afford the black movement comes from our efforts to engage exploited whites in the struggles and values of radical politics.

ON LABOR AND THE STRUGGLES OF WORKING PEOPLE

From its beginnings, SDS has recognized the crucial role that the working class has to fulfill in any movement for radical social change. More recently, we have rejected the false notion that most Americans are "middle-class". Considering professional, service, white-collar, and university-trained technical workers as a "class" separate from blue-collar industrial workers serves only to confuse and divide millions of workers and students and prevent them from realizing the corporate capitalist source of their exploitation and their common interest in uniting against its oppression. To further the unity and radical consciousness of the working class as a whole we support the rank-and-file insurgencies of working people against their employers, the Government, and corrupt union leadership. Our concern is not only the improvement of wages and working conditions for our brothers and sisters in the shops, but for a transformation of all labor issues growing out of alienation and lack of control into a movement against the capitalist system itself.

ON THE STUDENT REVOLT

SDS views the multiversity as a knowledge factory, a kind of service station producing skilled manpower and intelligence for integration with the marketable needs of the major corporate, government, and military institutions. Neither the content of the educational process, nor the ends to which our learning and resources are directed, further the fulfillment of humane social needs. Rather, the "knowledge commodity" (ourselves and the results of our work) is shaped to further the production of waste, social oppression, and military destruction. The recognition of this process has been the driving force in our work to transform student "alienation" into a radical force reaching out and uniting with constituencies beyond the campus in struggles against oppressive university administrations.

from moral outrage to radical vision

The New Left has not been noted for the completeness or coherence of its analysis or strategy for change. Within the ranks of SDS exists a variety of political positions: socialists, anarchists, communists, and humanist liberals. Nonetheless, the interplay of these ideas with a common commitment to action has produced a rich and powerful shared political experience emerging from an on-going struggle. We have looked primarily to that experience as the source and test of political truth, rather than to this or that dogmatic catechism. While not shunning analytical work, we have always seen this focus as a basis of our strength and authenticity.

Whatever the degree of the New Left's diversity, however, we have always asserted a common clarity in our values. Within our vision, all authentically revolutionary movements are seen as first, last, and always movements for human freedom, whatever form their demands may take in a given historic period. The New Left radical consciousness began with the perception of a gap between the actual reality of our daily lives and the accessible potentiality for human fulfillment already in existence. This tension—the contradiction between what is and what can be—first futilely sought its resolution in a quest for personal salvation.

When the interests of the dominant social order denied the realization of that potential, we discovered our powerlessness, our unfreedom. Moreover, the social character of our oppression revealed the need of a collective struggle for liberation. We discovered our deepest personal hopes and desires were the widely-held aspirations of many. That discovery has led to our affirmation of a common humanity with all of the oppressed.

At present, the contradiction between the brutal and dehumanized reality of advanced corporate capitalism and the liberating potential of its technology and productive organization has never been greater. Planned obsolescence and waste production increase in the midst of growing scarcity. Fragmented job specialization and meaningless toil expand; while cybernation and automation contain the possibility of total job integration, the abolition of alienated labor, and the vast expansion of free and creative activity. From this viewpoint, all the world's people have never been more oppressed. At this moment of history, on the other hand, the potential of the struggle for human fulfillment has never been greater. The New Left will be at the center of that struggle. Our humanity is at stake. Join us.

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